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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 TBILISI 001035

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [KBTS](#) [RU](#) [GG](#)  
SUBJECT: GEORGIA: DISCONTENT IN ABKHAZIA WITH RUSSIA'S WARM  
EMBRACE

REF: A. TBILISI 924  
[1](#)B. TBILISI 1034  
[1](#)C. TBILISI 321  
[1](#)D. 08 TBILISI 2174

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN F. TEFFT FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D

[1](#)1. (C) Summary and comment. According to press reporting and the Abkhaz government-in-exile, civil society groups and others in Abkhazia have begun to criticize de facto Abkhaz "president" Sergey Bagapsh for handing Abkhazia over to the Russians. Opposition leaders and ordinary Abkhaz appear especially unhappy with the arrival of Russian border guards on the administrative boundary line. They have also expressed concern over economic deals made that give Rosneft an exclusive license to explore for oil and gas deposits in the Black Sea off the coast of Abkhazia, and the transfer of management rights of the Sukhumi airport and "Abkhaz" railway to the Russians. With "presidential" elections slated to be held in Abkhazia on December 12, opposition figures are speaking out publicly against these actions. This discontent is yet another example of Abkhazia's struggle to find a balance between dependence on Russia for security and financial resources and their desire for independence. End summary and comment.

RUSSIA FULLY IN CONTROL

[1](#)2. (C) On April 30, Russia and Abkhaz de facto authorities signed an agreement delegating to Russia the authority to protect the Abkhaz administrative boundary, and the Russian border guards are well on their way to assuming full responsibility for the boundary (ref A). On May 26, the Abkhaz granted a license to state-owned Russian company Rosneft to develop offshore oil and gas deposits off the coast of Abkhazia, which are estimated at between 80 and 200 million tons. Earlier, on May 15, de facto Abkhaz officials granted Russia 10-year management rights to both the rail system and Sukhumi airport, in exchange for which the Russians are providing the Abkhaz with a two million ruble credit for railway reconstruction work (ref B).

[1](#)3. (C) While Bagapsh has stressed that this is only a temporary transfer, the Abkhaz population sees this as one more sign that their territory is being handed over to the Russians, according to Malkhaz Akishbaia, Chairman of the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (in exile). Akishbaia maintains strong contacts in Abkhazia and believes that ordinary Abkhaz citizens are distressed by what they see as the Russian takeover of Abkhazia. He highlighted the Upper Kodori region (an ethnic Georgian area) as another example of Russian control, as only six or seven Abkhaz militia are stationed with 350 Russian border guards. He said that the Russians are attempting to circumvent local property laws, which require Abkhaz "citizenship" to own land. He reported that the Russians are inventorying all houses and property in Gali region in anticipation of bringing thousands of most likely Russian military personnel

and their families in to Gali.

#### PUSHING BACK AGAINST RUSSIAN CONTROL

¶4. (C) Leaders of six political and social organizations in Abkhazia released a declaration in May criticizing Bagapsh for allowing the Russians to assume so much control over their territory and calling for a more balanced relationship with Russia. The leader of the opposition party Economic Development, Beslan Butba, who has been mentioned as a possible "presidential" candidate, issued a similar statement. The de facto "vice-president" Raul Khajimba resigned his post on May 26, citing disagreements with Bagapsh over his treatment of the opposition, but also criticizing the border agreement signed in April with Russia; he is another possible rival to Bagapsh. Perhaps with an eye on the December elections, Bagapsh was recently quoted in The New York Times stating that the independence of Abkhazia was one of his main concerns. He noted that he had pushed back on the Russians several times when they wanted more from Abkhazia then he was supposedly willing to concede. Akishbaia said that while the last election, in 2005, was split among Abkhaz, the Georgians voted as a bloc for Bagapsh, and that recently Bagapsh's party, United Abkhazia, had been treating the Georgians in Gali better in an attempt to again win their vote in December. According to Akishbaia, the Georgians in Gali still support Bagapsh because, despite their disappointment in his policies since the conflict, he is at least a familiar face to them.

#### COMMENT

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¶5. (C) Although few would call Abkhaz local politics democratic, it appears there is some room for public debate. In the lead up to "presidential" elections in December, it is instructive that the one issue Bagapsh's rivals have seized upon is his enthusiastic embrace of Russian influence. Ironically, Russia opposed Bagapsh and supported Khajimba in the last "presidential" election - and now Khajimba is criticizing Bagapsh for being too close to Moscow, while Bagapsh must defend those ties. Although the ethnic Abkhaz and Armenian residents of Abkhazia are still strongly supportive of independence, they clearly have become quite uncomfortable with the true impact of Russia's actions. As one Abkhaz from Sukhumi joked to EmbOff, "we used to have our freedom, but now we have our independence."

TEFFT